

Postmodernism's Two visions

Selections from The Death of Truth, Chapter 4 by Jim Leffel, Contributor

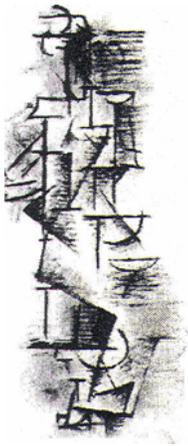
Postmodernism leaves its adherents awash in an ocean of divergent "truths." Without ultimate truth and meaning to cling to, what keeps Postmodernists afloat? Surprisingly, many turn to analyzing and applying power. When truth dies, power fills the vacuum. Postmodernists concern themselves with the rhetorical significance of ideas, not their truth or rationality. Postmodernists agree that various groups' attempts to wield power is what drives society, yet their reactions to those struggles split them into two camps. *Skeptical Postmodernists* regard power negatively, as an overwhelming force of repression. They view the cultural relativity of truth as an occasion for a cynical posture toward all commitments to truth. *Affirmative Postmodernists* see power positively, as a tool. They see the rise of subjective, culturally based truth and reality as an opportunity to create new realities, and by extension, new kinds of individuals. Both skeptics and affirmatives are readily recognizable in our culture.



Skeptical Postmodernism

Skeptical postmodernists devote themselves to uncovering what they regard as the underlying motivations for others' truth claims. In their cynicism, they unmask what they consider the hidden agendas that drive social life.

According to postmodernists, people who claim to know truth or absolutes have an ugly history. Their



wide-ranging truth claims are embedded in language, and as we have seen, postmodernists believe language is by nature metaphorical and relative, not objective. . .

According to postmodernists, human history is marked by the tragedy of so-called rational, objective "truth" being afflicted on the weak in society. [Examples cited are Manifest Destiny, Racism in the U.S., The Nazis and the Jews or Marxist rule.] Postmodernists of this sort therefore often suggest withdrawal or 'ironic

detachment" from culture. In the face of the individual's powerlessness to change reality, the skeptics often despair. Such postmodern cynicism is reflected in art, including popular cinema and music. . . unqualified cynicism toward government, education, business, law and, in a word, all of society.

[Scientists and the Government are almost always the villains in movies - scientific discoveries are threats to humanity - and those in power, oppressive and conspiratorial. In music, alternative rock's lyrics are full of hopelessness.]

Affirmative Postmodernism

Affirmative postmodernists are more difficult to describe because they are active in so many diverse causes. Indeed, eclecticism (borrowing from a variety of world views) and an ability to maintain even contradictory positions simultaneously are common among affirmative postmodernists. . . While affirmative postmodernists also believe our confidence in enlightenment reason is a cultural bias, they attach a significance to this insight different from the skeptics. For them, the annihilation of objective truth (that is, truth that's true to everyone) opens the door to cultural change.

Affirmative postmodernists are sometimes referred to as "constructivists." They are constructivists because, not believing in any objective foundation for reality or knowledge claims about reality, these postmoderns feel free to create, or construct "knowledges" and "realities." Many American postmodernists work to create socially constructed reality" through political and social activism. They argue that if reality is rooted in culture, then we can actually construct new realities through social change. The people leading the way today in the so-called politics of race, gender, sexuality, ecology, poverty, and religion are mostly affirmative postmodernists even though some would be unaware that their views fit this description. . . Affirmative postmodernists substitute power for truth. . . Since truth cannot tell us how to order society, our only recourse is to assert whatever power is necessary to carry out our agenda. Constructivists argue that the dominant culture has asserted its power in the past, and this is how we came to have certain cultural "truths" . . . Consequently, postmodern activists advocate the cause of the oppressed by offering new versions of "truth." . . . the tool of special interests groups promoting their agenda using political and cultural power. Power becomes the only arbiter. . . of what cultural "truth" will prevail.

Postmodern thinking has shaped contemporary education.

Teachers are there to help students "construct" knowledge rather than discover it.

Postmodern educators promote:

Diversity (guarding unchanged the values and life of each sub cultural group);

Equality (in power relationships);

Tolerance (i.e. never negating or criticizing oppressed groups allowing them to express themselves freely; while "debunking" the dominant power groups)

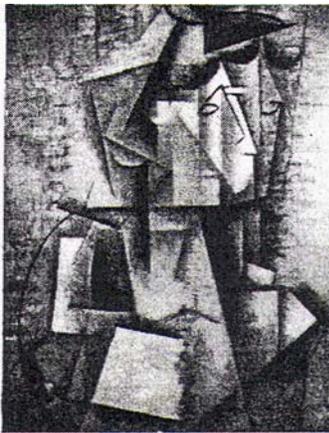
Creativity (in constructing knowledge);

Emotions (self-esteem is very important); and

Intuition (over rational thinking).



A clear example of **Constructivism** is the political correctness movement thriving on college campuses. Supposing that the way we use language perpetuates racial and cultural bias, it seeks to free society of bias by changing our way of speaking about one another. Political correctness is not about avoiding hurt feelings, it is an attempt to create different kinds of people, by changing their cultural environment.



"Multiculturalism" is a watchword in education. But it can mean two very different things. To the modernist - it means understanding our cultural differences, so we can unify our relationships. But to those aggressively pushing a postmodern constructivist position - diverse social realities are to be emphasized, even to advocating separate schools. Tolerance of conflicting views is demanded of the "white, Western, male" dominant culture; but the goal for minority cultures is one of raising their self-esteem by affirming their views, while putting down those of the "oppressing" culture.

The basic tenets of a postmodern culture are:

Reality is what is real to me, to each his own. People are defined (molded) by their culture so they are what their culture makes them be. We can't judge other cultures, because our reality is different from theirs. The Western "white! male" world is arrogantly dominating and potentially destroying our natural world. (Cynicism and pessimism about life pervades most postmodern thinking.) Nothing can be proven. Tolerance of everyone and everything (except the domineering culture) is the chief virtue. Intuition and feelings tell us more than reason. Existential thinking pervades - "Don't think - Just do it!"